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Abstract

Towards a cultural understanding of the value of the intertidal zone

I live in a place that is subject to substantial tidal variation, which although not extreme, is sufficient to lull you into a false sense of security and then with little warning, it can wash you out. On 6th December 2013 our coast in Suffolk, UK was subject to a major tidal surge that saw me rowing home over dry land. Home for me is a seagoing vessel, where the intertidal zone is both habitat and workplace.

For centuries our intertidal zone has been an ambiguous territory, both targeted for reclamation and valued as a buffer between dry land and the sea. However due to heightened sensitivity to its uniqueness, the instinctive mistrust of a place that becomes no place twice daily has moderated: now saltmarsh has secured a place within our culture that corresponds to an awakening of understanding. It is a pivotal zone routinely acknowledged as habitat for both fish and avian species, in contemporary parlance it provides an ecosystem service as a first line of defence, by dissipating tidal energy, it acts as a carbon sink and locks up pollutants within its root mass.

I have worked intensively with saltmarsh systems for more than a decade, exploring ways to understand its dynamic and to stabilize it through soft engineering interventions. Using case studies from my own experience, I will discuss the shift in awareness vital to enhancing a sense of community ownership, responsibility and affinity for the intertidal environment.